

Board & Administrator

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Plan for agenda items crucial to team's success

By Dr. Peter Gorman

Board meetings are your major performance in public, and each item presented should have gone through a thorough, proper rehearsal. To plan for board meetings, we kept a "rolling" agenda item calendar going out several years. The agendas were reviewed weekly at cabinet, and as soon as an item was presented at a meeting, it would go on the calendar in the future. Major items were presented to the board at least three times before appearing on the agenda, in the weekly *Board Update*, in a call, and during an in-person meeting. We created templates for agenda items and presentations that tied back to the strategic plan; it's easier for a board to vote for items linked to the strategic plan. The complete board packets were delivered to board members on the Wednesday before the board meeting the following Tuesday. After delivery, but before the board meeting, I held a series of meetings for up to four board members to clarify recommendations and answer any questions. This complied with the state's open meeting law. Board members agreed to ask questions at these meetings so that the board meeting time could be used for discussion, deliberation, and decision-making -- without surprises. It allowed staff time to research board members' questions and concerns in advance.

During board member discussion, sometimes the board wasn't clear or in agreement, and I would ask the board chair for direction. I would ask: "Help me to understand so I can explain it to staff ..." "I don't think I have clear direction; can you please clarify the board's intent ..." Periodically, I had to ask, "What is the desire of the board as a body? I heard what individual board members said, but I have not heard the will of the board." I did not want board members

or staff to depart a meeting with different expectations. Questions or concerns raised by citizens at board meetings were not answered at that time. We agreed to review them, and they might be addressed by staff and reported to the board in the weekly *Board Update*, depending on relevance. I've always believed in the importance



Dr. Peter Gorman

of the public being engaged in open school board meetings, but the frequency of a speaker in the public comment section sharing inaccurate, partially factual or patently false information has grown. Having a set method for responding to public comments was helpful to keep meetings progressing and to share accurate information. The day after a board meeting, we held a debrief where the cabinet analyzed what happened; reviewed comments, questions, and requests; and determined needed follow-up. Without a board-superintendent communications plan focusing on board meetings, you're leaving success to chance, and students, staff, and the public deserve better.

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Lead as a 'servant'

For board consultant Rick Maloney, the phrase "servant leader" helps explain board snafus like the one earlier this year where a district stakeholder was tossed from a board meeting for expressing her views,

"In my opinion, the board president, if he indeed directed removal from the room, unduly accelerated the process when there was little reason to do so," Maloney said

This could have been a matter of being in position so long that he lost the sense of "service to others" that is expressed in the term servant-leader, and he succumbed to the temptation to exercise authority, Maloney said. The board is at the top of the chain with regard to the teacher, and a servant-leader board would consider it to be in a position to serve not only the authority of the state but also those over whom the board is given its authority, he said.

It's a difficult enough concept for a new board member to understand, but it is also one that a long-time board member such as the board president may have forgotten. Power corrupts, and may have influenced this man's thinking, Maloney said.

What appeared to be an arbitrary reaction was the acceleration of the district response to the patron's "violation," Maloney said. The officer appeared on the video to be operating on his own in deciding to approach her, in deciding to remove her, and in deciding to handcuff her outside the room, he said.

"If the board president directed the action, he should have been more transparent, because merely stating the possibility that she could be ejected would give her notice and opportunity to correct the behavior that seemed to the board president to be errant," Maloney said.

"If he communicated intent, I didn't observe it," Maloney said. Maybe he made a hand motion or some similar less-than-fully-transparent communication to the police officer, he said. That's not enough, in an escalating crowd control situation such as this one, Maloney said.

The board holds its authority and exercises it on behalf of others, in this case the citizens of the school district, Maloney said. "A board that remembers the answer to the question 'Who's the boss?' will remember it at all times, not just at election time," he said.

The board president, who exercised the authority given to him by the board, was doing so not as a supreme authority in the room, but as a servant to the whole board. "This is also a difficult concept for board members to understand, whether they be new to the job, or have been in the job so long that they forgot," Maloney said.

The source of authority for the board president is the full board, he said. "The source of authority for the full board is the populace of the entire school district geographical area," Maloney said.

For information, consciousgovernance.com. ■

Support board's decision to hire the administrator

Minority board members can be negative when they are on the losing side of an issue. This is particularly true on vital issues like when the board decision involves hiring a new superintendent.

Here's a story about one board member's negative campaign against a new administrator she didn't want hired:

"We once had a board member who wanted to hire someone other than me," said a Florida administrator. "The board member took my hiring as a personal zing to her authority and set out to make my life uncomfortable."

The board member made snide remarks directed toward the administrator at meetings, and even

joked about her appearance.

How should a board react in a situation like this? The proper course of action is to support the full board's decision.

When the board hires a new superintendent, the board should remember that a key aspect of its role is to support the administrator.

Support from the full board was the reason the new superintendent stuck it out in the new position. "The rest of the board wanted to give me a chance to prove myself and I did," she said.

"Before too long, the rogue board member resigned. Non-support of her negative campaign from the full board was the reason." ■